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## SOME BOER CHARACTERISTICS.

BY GEORGE LACY.

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THE most fruitful, and certainly the most fascinating, study of mankind is man—not man as a physiological unit; but man as a human soul, as an individual in his social relations, and as a collective entity. An adequate study of him in these phases cannot be made at second hand, by reading books or listening to the narrative of travellers who have known him only as a fleeting phenomenon among many others encountered in a rapid journey. It may safely be said that no estimates are so erroneous, indeed worthless, as those of the globe-trotter concerning the peoples with whom he is transiently brought into contact. If the study is to be of any value, one must carry it on through long years; must take part with the man who is the object of the study in all his pursuits, become one with him in his home life, his public life, his work and his play—not so much to listen to what he says, for the tongue is an unruly and unreliable member, as to observe what he does, and to probe into the root motives that prompt him in doing it. More than this, one must be familiar with his history, the achievements and failures of his race, and with all the circumstances by which he has in the past been surrounded; for nothing is more certain than that man is what circumstances have made him.

Concerning the Boers, I may safely claim that I have fulfilled to their widest extent all these essentials, more especially in respect of the Boers of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. The application of the term “Boer” to the whole Dutch population of South Africa is, while racially correct, decidedly misleading in practice. The Boers of the Transvaal differ essentially from those of the Cape Colony; those of the Orange Free State lie, geographically and in the scale of civilization, between the

two; and the Boers of Natal are readily distinguishable from all the others. I shall confine my remarks to those of the Transvaal and the Free State.

It is a common error to suppose that the Boers are a Dutch race. They are, strictly speaking, Dutch neither in descent, language nor manner of life. Of the original Boer population, a very large proportion—I think more than one-fourth—were French Huguenots, and French names are as common in the Transvaal as those of unmistakably Dutch origin. General Joubert is French, not only in his descent, but also in appearance and demeanor; President Krüger's wife bore the distinctively French name of Du Plessis. Perhaps the three commonest names in South Africa are De Villiers, Du Toit and Viljoen—all manifestly French. Besides this, there is a much larger admixture of colored blood in the Transvaal than is commonly believed; in the northeastern districts especially, I have seen scores of Boers who were unmistakably of mongrel descent. The Griquas, who number many thousands, and live in communities of their own, are, as every one knows, the offspring of Boer men and Hottentot women; and the "Cape Boys" are the same, or the offspring of Boer men and Bantu women. It is not to these I allude, but to men who are accepted by their brother Boers as equals and compatriots, which the Griquas and "Cape Boys" are not.

The language of the Boers is polyglot, not Dutch, and no Hollander can at first understand it. From their mixed French descent, one might suppose that it partook largely of the French tongue, but as a matter of fact, there is scarcely a trace of that influence in it. As in recent years the Boers tried to stamp out the English language in the Transvaal; so in previous times they tried to stamp out the French tongue in the Cape Colony; and they succeeded so effectually that it became completely lost. The Boer language is an admixture of debased Dutch, corrupted English, and Kitchen Kaffir.

In their manner of life, no people are less Dutch than the Boers. The distinctive feature of Dutch life is cleanliness, both in person and in the conduct of the home; the distinctive feature of Boer life is dirt. Unless it be among the inhabitants of the colder and more remote districts of Russia, the Boers must assuredly be the dirtiest white people in the world. I cannot believe that any people, of any color whatsoever, can be dirtier in

their appearance and habits. In fact, the amount of grime they carry about them is absolutely inconceivable to those accustomed to some of the minor refinements of life. In the days when the vast plains of the States swarmed with animal life, and the Boer was constantly killing, he was, indeed, a sight to see. He was usually a little above the middle height, but lanky, raw-boned and awkwardly put together, and his head, under the grease-saturated, broad-brimmed hat, was crowned with a tangled mass of matted hair which, perchance, had never known the attentions of a comb. In the midst of a dirt-streaked face his eyes looked at you bleared and shift, and, below, the lips, caked with dry tobacco-juice, stood out from a tangle of hair to which streaks of tobacco-juice gave a parti-colored aspect. His short coat, waistcoat and trousers, even his unbleached calico shirt, were covered throughout with stains and blotches of blood, which were also to be observed caked upon his hands and upon his home-made *veltschoens*, while his sockless ankles were not distinguishable from the soil of his farm. Since the great herds of game have been killed off, these bloodstains are of course absent; but the improvement in cleanliness is, it is to be feared, more apparent than real. Other kinds of dirt have taken the place of the clotted blood. There was but little difference to be seen between those who possessed fairly large flocks and herds—the only form of wealth known to the Boers prior to the gold era—and those who were the most poverty-stricken.

The other sex were no less unclean in their persons, but the subject is really too unsavory to be dwelt upon. Neither men nor women ever washed themselves, as we understand it, the extent of their ablutions being each morning to pour a pint or so of water into a tin basin and with the help of a foul rag daub their faces with it, all the inhabitants of the house using the same water. On Saturday nights, a small tub was brought in, with a little water in it, and in this water, unchanged throughout, the same perfunctory operation was performed upon the feet, though this function was often omitted for weeks.

In their home life the same characteristics obtained. The Netherlands housewife, accustomed to her sweet-smelling rooms and snowy linen, would upon entering a Boer tenement start back in dismay at the offensive atmosphere which assailed her. Although so used to the healthy, open-air life of the wagon, Boers

in their houses abjure the blessings of ventilation, and exist in an atmosphere which might be compared to that of a common lodging-house. At night, the men remove only their coats and waistcoats, and the women their cotton dresses, if even these. The houses of the less well-to-do, who of course were a large majority, often consisted of only one room, rarely indeed of three. In these houses there were frequently a dozen or more people. When there was only one room, the married couples occupied one end, cut off by a hanging screen of cotton material. The rest slept in a row upon the ground; first the young men above sixteen years of age, then the young women, and then the guests, the younger children huddling together in a corner. It would be quixotic to look for modesty or morality under such circumstances. No doubt, globe-trotters who have passed an hour or so in a few Boer houses of the better class since the influx of wealth to the Transvaal, will say this is an overdrawn picture; but, alas, the pigments are laid on with a hand so light that they do not depict the reality. The reality would not bear presentation.

Men of Mr. Stead's class, whose knowledge is apparently derived from a superfluous stock of sentimentality, try to persuade their readers and hearers that the Boers are a clean-living race, puritanical in their morals, and worthy on those grounds alone of our highest respect and admiration. It is not true. Immoral relations with their colored female dependents—whether they call them slaves, indentured apprentices, or hired servants—whatever they may be now, were but a few years ago so common as to be practically universal. I am not speaking at haphazard. My knowledge is derived from years of observation in many scores, nay, hundreds, of Boer houses. Apart from these immoralities, it must be said that the home life of the Boer was fairly pleasant. He had his differences with his wife; who has not? but, personally, I never saw these differences carried on any further than a wordy argument, conducted on both sides in high, shrill, falsetto voices. The women, in fact, accept the position of inferior mortals to their spouses. So far is this carried that they do not even eat together, the wife meekly waiting on her lord, and taking her own meal when he has finished. There does not appear to be much affection between them. They marry very young; but, after the first few months of wedlock, the unions look much more like affairs of convenience than

of affection. Nor have they much apparent affection for their offspring. The women are careful enough in rearing them until they can toddle about by themselves, after which they are in receipt of more cuffs and shrill anathemas than demonstrations of affection. The men take scarcely any notice of their children until the boys are old enough to be of use, when they are speedily initiated into all that pertains to cattle, horses and wagons. Formerly, the lads learned to shoot almost before anything else; but, with the disappearance of the game that has become a thing of the past, the modern Boer lad knows little more about the use of firearms than does the London lad. Neither lad nor girl has any education. In many of the well-to-do houses there was to be found a schoolmaster, who was invariably an Englishman or Hollander who had failed in every other pursuit—generally, indeed, a broken-down drunkard; but the great majority were taught neither to read nor write, and of the adults of the Transvaal to-day I should be surprised to find that twenty per cent. can do so. The younger generation are no doubt better looked after.

Among themselves, Boers are quarrelsome to the last degree. No expedition or transaction was ever undertaken by them in which the leaders did not sooner or later break out into rancorous recriminations. From the time when, in Natal in 1838, Hendrik Potgieter quarrelled with the other leaders, Pieter Retief and Gert Maritz, and in the face of the enemy withdrew his commando from the operations against the Zulus, and when a year or two later, two, if not three, separate governments were set up by rival factions, it has been ever thus. In the hunting-field, quarrels as to the rightful ownership of animals killed are constant, and I have often seen them come to blows.

In their intercourse with strangers other than fellow-Boers, they are extremely overbearing. In my rides in the Transvaal and Orange Free State in connection with the acquisition of farms back in the sixties, during which I visited more Boer houses than I can reckon up, I often had to submit to language and manners that made my blood boil. Their standard of civility is a graduated one. The man with a wagon or two would always receive outward consideration; the man on horseback was tolerated; but the unfortunate on foot received the shortest possible shrift. This raises the question of their oft-asserted hospitality. Yes, they are hospitable in their own way; but of what people

living on farms widely apart, as they do, cannot the same thing be said? I have travelled as much as most men, throughout nearly every one of the Southern Colonies of Great Britain, in several European countries, and in remote districts of the British Isles, but I cannot call to mind meeting with absolute inhospitality anywhere, except from natives of what is now German East Africa, and, in lesser degree, in Gazaland. Will any one who knows both South Africa and Australia maintain that the Boers would for one moment tolerate the "sundowner," and erect special buildings for his reception, as the squatters do? The Boer is, in a way, a sociable creature, and a terrible gossip, and he is always glad of an opportunity of letting his tongue go, when he can do so without loss to what he considers his self-respect. A traveller who stops for an hour or two to rest his animals can always reckon on a cup of coffee and a good flow of words, or even a meal, if it should happen to be meal-time. Indeed, if he arrive in the evening he will be given a blanket and allowed to lie on the floor with the rest, if he is not with a wagon; but where in the world would such accommodation be refused? What a Boer will not do is to offer food at any other time than at the regular hour for a meal. I was once twenty-four hours without food through arriving at two houses after the meals had been cleared away. Leaving the first at daylight, I arrived at another about ten o'clock, and, explaining the matter to the owner, asked him to break the rule and allow me to have something to eat, as I was on a special mission, and could not wait for the mid-day meal. He went to his orchard, and picking off the ground, where they lay thick under the trees, a couple of peaches, placed them on a plate before me. I do not think he meant to be churlish, but "hospitality" is not quite the right word to apply to his act.

Lord Wolseley recently laid stress upon the honesty of the Boers. I do not know precisely what he meant, but in the matter of *meum* and *tuum* in respect of portable articles the reverse is the truth. I spent quite two years going about from farm to farm with wagon-loads of miscellaneous goods, bartering them for ostrich-feathers, ivory, hides, wool, live stock, or whatever I could get. I have elsewhere related my experiences on one of these expeditions, and must here confine myself to saying that I scarcely ever exposed samples of my goods at any farm without attempts being made to purloin articles that could be readily concealed.

All took part in this, old and young, male and female; and constant watch had to be kept. I once detected a young girl, the daughter of a Boer who was then, and long afterward, a prominent member of the Free State Volksraad, trying to secrete a case of watches under her apron. No shame is evinced on detection; the matter is treated as a good subject for laughter. In purchasing horses and cattle, the greatest care has to be exercised. No London horse-coper could compete with the average Boer in the art of passing off broken-winded horses or sand-cracked trek oxen as sound animals. Dishonesty extends further still than to matters of this kind. A Boer, whose name is well known to the world, many years ago, when acting as President of a Land Commission for apportioning out farms in the Leydenberg District, "did" my partner out of 36,000 acres of land by as barefaced a piece of knavery as could well be conceived. Dishonesty and untruthfulness are twin brothers, and both are prominent features in the Boer character. He who relies upon the unsupported testimony of a Boer will most assuredly come to grief. It is not merely that the habit of exaggeration is a second nature to him, but that he has actually no conception of the nature of truth. He will say exactly what he conceives will best serve his ends in the matter he has in hand, without any reference whatever to what may happen to be the actual facts. Indeed, it is doubtful if his mind is able to take in the facts as they are. It is of that character that it colors the facts in accordance with his own desires and beliefs. The Boer has a habit of calling every defeat a great victory, and his doing so is not so much a deliberate attempt at deceiving, as it is the expression of a *bona fide* belief. He is so saturated with the conviction that he cannot be defeated that he is quite unable to appraise the facts at their true value. The conviction overrides all else, and in a mind capable of containing only one or two leading ideas, that of defeat can find no place. When he sees his dead and wounded strewn about the field, the sight does not convey to him any sense of disaster, for he is convinced that the loss on the other side must necessarily be three times as great.

I do not think there is any feature in the Boer character quite so distinctive as this ingrained disregard of truth, this absolute incapacity to understand the meaning of straightforwardness. It enters into their every transaction in life, from the smallest to the greatest. Whether it is in relating an experience in the hunt-



ing-field, in selling a horse, a wagon or a farm, in giving evidence in a court of law, or in an affair of state, it is always present, and always glaringly obvious to the outsider. In their statecraft these traits must be clear to the most careless reader. The recent Blue Books afford ample evidence of them, but in Mr. Fitzpatrick's "Transvaal from Within" they are revealed to a degree that comes probably as a revelation to those who thought they had a fair knowledge of the Boer mind and method, but which to the sentimental Boerophile who knows nothing of them must be absolutely crushing.

We hear a great deal about the Boers' love for their country, and their willingness to shed the last drop of their blood in its defence. Those who talk thus know nothing whatever about the matter. The Boer has no country. He does not know the meaning of patriotism. He is a nomad by nature. One country is as good to him as another, if it serve his requirements. He is seldom on his farm for long, and is more happy when he takes his stock away to some distant winterveldt, and lives in his wagon, than when at home. If he is assured of getting better country for his stock on easier terms, or preferably on no terms at all, he is as ready to desert his own for good and all as he is to eat his breakfast. What he is fighting for is liberty, and he interprets liberty as did Cicero: "The essence of liberty is to do exactly as one chooses." The limitations to liberty he cannot understand. "The like liberty of all" is to him a meaningless string of words. That is his patriotism. The present war cannot properly be called a Boer-made war; it is a Krüger-made war, and a Hollander-made war. The average Boer hates the Britisher with lasting hatred; he despises him or, at all events, has persuaded himself that he despises him; but he is much too lazy and enervated a creature to deliberately set to work to drive the Britisher out of the country. All that has been driven into his weak mind by ambitious and designing men.

I must now come to one more leading feature in the Boer character, and one most disagreeable to dwell upon. The Boer is absolutely callous to suffering, whether in animals or in human beings. When we remember that, until a few years ago, the whole male population was constantly engaged in killing animals and skinning and cutting them up—were, in fact, practically a vast community of professional butchers—one can scarcely be sur-

prised that animal suffering raises no sentiment within them; but their cruelties to their fellow-creatures cannot but be regarded with astonishment. One can find in many books descriptions of their terrible savagery in the conduct of their wars with native tribes; but it is in the home life that they are seen at the worst, for there their cruelties are committed in cold blood. I have over and again seen slaves—they call them “indentured apprentices” when the Britisher makes inept inquiries—thrashed with hippopotamus-hide *sjamboks* with a degree of severity and savagery that would do no discredit to a Dervish, and that for the most trifling offences. They were usually spread-eagled to a wagon-wheel to receive this punishment, and sometimes the Boer would thrash until he could thrash no longer. White prisoners, especially if they should happen to be British, too, have often come into this kind of treatment. In 1866, I was eye-witness to a very bad case. It was in the Pongolo Bush. An English sawyer was charged with stealing a hatchet from a Boer. There was a field-cornet there, and this man, after hearing the Boer’s complaint, caused the sawyer to be seized, had him fastened to a wagon-wheel, and ordered him to be given fifty lashes. The sawyer was then bound to a horse with his head on the rump, as we see in the pictures of Mazeppa, and sent in that position thirty miles through a blazing sun, to Wakkerstroom to be tried! I was shooting at the time, and was the only other Englishman in the district, and was powerless to prevent it.

The last Boer trait to which I can refer within the limits of this article is their alleged character as a deeply religious people. This is a very difficult matter to deal with in a few words. Not being what is called a religious man myself, I am a little in doubt as to what is meant by the claim made. The Boer I take to be a Deist more than a Christian. His Predikant in the churches may hold forth to him the Christian doctrines, but away from them his God is an authopomorphic God. He is in the first place the God of War, and in the second, God the Protector. The belief that the first and most acceptable, if not the only, business God has is to look after the interests of the Boer, I take to be absolutely sincere. Whether these fanatical persuasions can rightly be called beliefs is a question into which I cannot enter, beyond stating my own conviction that they are more hysterical in their nature than grounded on thought or reason. Hysterical or not,

the Boer acts up to his belief. His God teaches him neither ethics nor morals; He is God the Warrior and God the Protector, and nothing more. He is the God of the Pentateuch, and therefore the Boer ethic is the ethic of the Jews in the Wilderness, supplemented by additions resulting from his peculiar life in the midst of wild animals and wilder men. How far his fanatical belief that he is God's special favorite enters into his life, apart from making him arrogant, is not easy to determine. He is regular in his observances of the forms of worship which his circumstances have created for him; but except in times of peril the influence of his religious belief is not otherwise traceable. His method of worship is lugubrious in the extreme. To the eye there is neither reverence, cheerfulness nor devotion in it. It is a thing of the lips, and full of dolefulness and gloom. When I have attended their Sabbath Bible readings—which are almost entirely confined to the Mosaic records—and psalm-sings in their own houses, I have always found myself getting depressed and moody, and have had to pinch myself to rouse myself to a realization of its unreality. It is like a nightmare. The solemnity is so stolid, the tone so monotonous, sing-song and gruesome, and the whole function so lifeless and soulless, that it is impossible to believe that there is any real feeling in it.

And what has made these strange people what they are? Consider their history. They are by nature a dissatisfied people. They left their original European homes because the conditions forced upon them were distasteful to them, and they left the Cape Colony because they could not endure the restraints advancing civilization imposed upon them. They entered a strange country, full of strange animals and stranger men. The men were hostile, savage and ruthless, and they had to be ever on the alert—in the protection of their own lives. Completely cut off from the world, they wandered about in their wagons for years upon years, homeless and friendless, and forever fighting the savage foes who occupied the country. Their horror of these foes grew upon them until they gradually came to regard them not as human beings, but as vermin to be exterminated on every opportune occasion. They had no consolations but their Old Testaments, and they read and reread these (for the overtrekkers were better educated than their offspring) until the similarity between the Jews in the Wilderness and themselves so impressed them that they slowly

confounded the one with the other, and eventually became honestly convinced that it was they themselves who were God's chosen people. And thus they lived for decades, every family deprived of some of its members in the fight, and practically without any government or emblem of consolidation. They had no literature, no art, no music but a stray fiddle or harmonium, absolutely none of the requirements of existence. Their life became a sordid fight against their environments. They intermarried until the whole state became one vast family, and with this intermarriage their intellects grew debased. And thus they gradually lost much that makes man manly and attractive.

That with good government and under more civilized conditions, they are capable of better things is undoubted. Among the Boers of Natal (especially in the Umvoti District), of the Cape Colony, and even of certain districts of the Free State, I have met many Boers, who, though of a rather low order of intellect, and incapable of any achievements in the higher departments of our mental life, were in all other respects as high-toned, upright and courteous gentlemen as anyone would desire to meet. Rid the Transvaal of the incubus of its corrupt and incapable government, give it a well-considered constitution and supervision, and the Boer, though he can never rise very high among white races, will in the next generation be a very different man from what his circumstances have hitherto made him.

GEORGE LACY.